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SUBJECT: IRAQI LEADERS CALL FOR UNITY IN CONFRONTING
VIOLENCE AT COMMEMORATION OF FORMER ISCI FOUNDER

¶1. Summary: The Ambassador attended the sixth anniversary commemoration of the death of Ayatollah Mohammed Baqr al-Hakim, the founder of the Islamic Supreme Council of Iraq (ISCI) political movement. A Who's Who of the political class attended the ceremony, PM Maliki addressed the importance of overcoming sectarian divisions and confronting the common enemy: terrorists who attempt to divide the Iraqi nation into sects, ethnic groups or other warring factions. In his only reference to the coalition forces, Maliki warned that terrorists may be attempting to disrupt Iraq's plans to celebrate the June 30 redeployment of coalition forces from Iraqi cities. The PM's call for national vigilance and public support for the efforts of the Iraqi army and police to provide security in the face of efforts to sow sectarian strife was complemented by calls by Sunni and Shi'a clerics for Iraqis to embrace each other - as Iraqis - and to act to promote national unity. The Ambassador made brief press remarks to the ISCI-affiliated al-Furat television station on the importance we attach to the strength of Iraqi political and clerical calls for unity. End Summary.

Ayatollah of National Unity

¶2. Finance Minister and ISCI member Bayan Jaber presided over the commemoration ceremony on June 27 at the ISCI compound in Baghdad while ISCI heir-apparent and nephew of the departed, Amar al-Hakim, welcomed guests (in the absence of his father, Abd al-Aziz al-Hakim, who is terminally ill in Tehran). President Jalal Talabani, VP Adil Abd al-Mahdi, PM Nuri al-Maliki, Speaker Ayad Samaraie, Vice Speaker Arif Tayfur, Sunni Waqf director Sheikh Ahmed Abdul-Ghafur al-Samaraie, and Shi'a Waqf director Mohamed Saleh al-Haidari addressed a mixed audience of politicians -- among them Ahmed Chalabi, former interim PM Ayad Allawi, former IGC President Adnan Pachachi - diplomats, and clerics.

Political Message: Combat terrorists;
Complete Iraqi Sovereignty

¶3. President Talabani, reading from prepared remarks with what seemed a sad world-weariness, opened the political speeches with a refrain that echoed in the others that followed: Mohammed Baqr al-Hakim contributed his life to toppling the Saddam dictatorship, and died a martyr at the hands of terrorists. These terrorists nearly dealt the death knell to Iraqi efforts to build a new, just Iraq by sowing sectarian strife. Talabani called on religious leaders to declare those who kill innocents "infidels," and demanded that neighboring countries pursue the "criminals" within their borders who killed so many Iraqis. Vice Speaker Tayfur read remarks in the name of KRG President Masoud Barzani, who called al-Hakim's killing a great loss for the nation. Both Kurdish leaders emphasized the importance of keeping all components of the Iraq nation in a federal union.

¶4. Prime Minister Maliki, in a low voice but with the resolute cadence and intonation of a cleric's sermon, affirmed that al-Hakim had not died, but remained alive with God. The PM called on all Iraqis to be ready for "martyrdom" in the quest to preserve Iraq and protect its people. Connecting al-Hakim's struggle with Saddam and the Baathists, Maliki insisted that the current struggle against al-Qaeda was just and that dictators and terrorists were cowards despised by the ordinary people of Iraq. Focusing on the challenge ahead in the context of recent bombings in Sadr City and elsewhere, the PM called for national unity to accomplish what al-Hakim died for: "We have sovereignty, and we need to stabilize it." He evinced conviction that terrorists would not be allowed to dampen the joy that Iraqis would feel on June 30, 2009, but said that the Iraqi army and police forces would need the support from the Iraqi people in order to accomplish their mission and complete Iraq's sovereignty. He expressed confidence that Iraqi security forces were up to the task before them, and that the political process in Iraq would continue. He ended his extemporaneous remarks with an invocation of al-Hakim's name, as one who would be watching over Iraq and inspiring Iraqis in the days ahead. Speaker of Parliament Ayad Samaraie paid tribute to the al-Hakim family as a "fighting family" that had contributed 60 martyrs, and commended Mohammed Baqr al-Hakim for keeping a "door open to all" in his effort to build a new Iraq.

¶5. VP Adil Abd al-Mahdi (ISCI) expanded on Maliki's themes, emphasizing the overarching theme of "working towards justice" and the need to form a government of national unity. He linked the assassination of al-Hakim at the Imam Ali

BAGHDAD 00001745 002 OF 002

Mosque in Najjaf six years ago with the recent cold-blooded killing "of the poor and the innocent" in Sadr City and Taza, and warned of the dangers that a revival of sectarian bloodshed. He discussed the strategy of al-Qaeda leaders (mentioning Zarqawi and Zawahiri specifically) of killing Shi'a in order to provoke a blind, bloody response, and condemned them for their policy of killing Muslims as well as non-Muslims. The goal of the terrorists' explosions is to send a clear message that the foreign troops' withdrawal from the cities will create chaos and (further) killings. He said recent attacks should be a wake-up call to Iraqi security forces to seize the initiative and "stop this cheap killing."

The Iraqi people should unite in eradicating terrorism and standing in solidarity with the Iraqi armed forces. He berated other countries for their silence about the killings in Iraq, and called for them to take real action to stop providing arms to terrorists and issuing worthless statements.

Clerical Cohesion Around a Common Message

¶6. The head of the Sunni Waqf, Sheikh Ahmed Abdul-Ghafur al-Samaraie, addressed the mostly-Shi'a audience with a powerful call for unity and tolerance. To make his point, he drew attention to the victims of terrorism in terms of profession rather than confession: teachers, students, tribal leaders, medical doctors. Terrorism is the "high tax" paid by all Iraqi people in the form of death, fear and hunger. He professed the people of the great Iraqi civilization would withstand such challenges, provided the Iraqi people showed each other that they placed value in humanity. He stressed that "the best people are those who help others," and put that duty above that of prayer: "The real Muslim is the one who doesn't harm others by his hand or his words." He expressed hope that the al-Hakim anniversary would be an opportunity to reaffirm this attribute of Islam. Shi'a Waqf leader Mohammed Saleh al Haidari praised his colleagues words, ending the commemoration on an ecumenical high note. (Note: In a sermon the 27th, al-Haidari explained

that al-Qaida and the Baathists sought to reignite sectarian strike so as to undermine confidence in Iraq as the U.S. forces withdraw.)

¶7. Comment: ISCI's commemoration of al-Hakim followed a string of bombings that has unnerved Iraqis and given conspiracy theorists grist for sowing sectarian strife. The refrain heralding the importance of Iraqi unity, the cross-confessional denunciation of terrorism and violence, and the call for the public to support Iraqi security forces are the right messages for Iraqi leaders to deliver on the eve of the June 30 redeployment of coalition forces from Iraqi cities. Iraqi leaders have gone a step forward in reassuring the public that the Iraqi state is ready to shoulder its security responsibilities. That -- rather than the posture of coalition forces -- is now the main message. End Comment.

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